

How Idaho Got Its Name

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Making up new names has been going on for a long time

Do you want to know how Idaho got its name? There are many stories about the naming of Idaho. Perhaps you have heard more than one of them. Almost all of them say that "Idaho" is an Indian word. This is not true. The name "Idaho" was made up by a politician, not by an Indian. Making up names for states was very common. Many names for new events or products are needed every year, and there are people who work hard at nothing more than thinking up new names for places and things.

Making up new names has been going on for a long time. As the United States added and then settled new land to the west, new territories and states were formed. Each new territory needed a name. About half of these names are at least thought to be Indian words. Most

Indian words, however, are very different from English words. Most Indian place names were changed a lot to make them into English words. Thus it is often hard to find what Indian words—if any—the English place names came from.

By 1860, just before the Civil War, mining in the west had led to the need for lots of new names for towns and mining camps. Names also were needed for territories that were to become states. When what we call Colorado was ready to become a territory in 1860 and needed a name, a leader from that part of the country thought up the name "Idaho." He told everyone that it meant "gem of the mountains." Since the Colorado people were looking for an Indian word to use, he told them it was an Indian word. The Colorado people liked the name "Idaho."

GLOSSARY

Illinois: ('ill - i - noy' not 'ill - i - noise')

Territory: a geographic area; populated land that does not have full status (Idaho became a territory in 1863 and a state in 1890).

Steamboat: also steamship; a ship powered by steam

Navigation: to travel over water in a ship



Steamboat "Idaho"

Built in 1860, and operated by the Oregon Steam Navigation Co. until 1881 between the Dalles and upper cascades of the Columbia River; afterward moved to Puget Sound. Some think that the name of the State of Idaho was suggested by the use of this steamboat. Photo: 60-136, Oregon Historical Society.

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'Idaho' is not an Indian word

Their leaders asked Congress to use it for their territory. Then, just a few days after Congress voted to call that territory "Idaho," the people found out that "Idaho" was not an Indian word at all! They asked Congress to change the name from "Idaho" back to "Colorado." "Colorado" was not an Indian word, either; it was a Spanish word meaning "red." Much of the soil and rock in Colorado is red. They decided that if no one could find a good Indian word, they might as well stay with "Colorado."

In 1860, while the Colorado leaders were talking of using the name "Idaho," one of their friends in the Pacific Northwest named a new steamboat on the Columbia River the *Idaho*. Later that year gold was discovered in the Clearwater country of what is now north-central Idaho. Soon the mines were called the Idaho mines, named after the steamboat that brought thousands of miners to the new gold camps. When the new mining country was made into a territory in 1863, congress chose to name it "Idaho." Just about everyone had forgotten about the Colorado mix-up over the name "Idaho" by that time. Idaho was still known as the "gem of the mountains," though.

Long after Idaho was created, people began to ask: "How did Idaho get its

name?" Some were smart enough to know that "gem of the mountains" was not a good meaning for an Indian name. They thought up all kinds of other meanings for what they imagined was an Indian word. None of the Indian meanings made any sense, because "Idaho" is not an Indian word. People tried to find Nez Perce, Shoshoni, Yakama, and Arapaho words that sounded like "Idaho." They never really got anywhere. They were looking for an Indian word that never existed.



1860 map of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and part of Montana by S. Augustus Mitchell Jr.

"Idaho" was used as a name for the territory and state because it was a good name that people liked the sound of, not just because they thought it was an Indian word. Since the man who thought up the name wanted it to mean "gem of the mountain," perhaps that's the best way to leave it.

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